

## **"Cooperatives are like families" - the story of 'Bio e Mare', an all-women fishing cooperative**



*Radoslava Petrova, founder of the Bio e Mare cooperative explains the importance of cooperatives, sustainable fishing and women in the fish industry.*

### **INTERNATIONAL DAY OF COOPERATIVES**

Saturday 5 July is the International Day of Cooperatives. Cooperatives play a key role in family and small-scale farming and contribute to food security and the eradication of hunger. As the [International Co-operative Alliance](#) (ICA) underlines, family-based agriculture, especially small-holder operations, can realize their potential by building cooperatives which allow them to have better access to markets and financing, better bargaining power, improve efficiency and innovate. Also, cooperative enterprises are adequate platforms for family farmers to develop social infrastructures based on ethical principles such as democracy, gender equality, concern for the community and the environment, among others.

For Radoslava, known to everyone as Rady, "cooperatives are like families, everybody helps out to get the job done". Rady adds that Bio e Mare works as a team with local fishers and also collaborates with two local cooperatives, the Scirocco and the Maestrale, "like two families that help one another". She points out that one of the fishermen, Giuseppe Maffei, known as Beppe, who also helps out with the deliveries alongside his son, accompanied her to FAO for the Family Farming Expo, highlighting the close collaboration between the fishers and the cooperative.

### **BIO E MARE - REINVENTING TRADITION**

Bio e Mare is composed of women between the ages of 21 and 50 who come from Italy, Brazil, Colombia, Bulgaria and Poland. As Rady points out, the international element enriches the cooperative, "it unites us instead of separating us, each woman brings something different to the table, a new recipe or idea." "For example, Bulgaria is famous for sweet and sour dishes, something which is not particularly known here in Italy", she adds. Reinventing tradition is central to this innovative cooperative.

Bio e Mare was founded in 2011 in Marina di Carrara (Tuscany); it was the first women's fisheries cooperative in Italy and has gone from strength to strength since its establishment. It is the only cooperative in Europe that salvages unsold fish directly from

fishers, by processing it into creams, sauces, pickled fish and much more. Any additional ingredients are certified organic ensuring high quality and, above all, healthy products.

As Rady explains, all eight women in the cooperative were already working at the Carrara Port in different capacities. Rady, born in Bulgaria, but an Italian citizen since 2000, worked as a secretary, but whenever she had time, she helped the fishermen.

Over time, she noticed that there was a lot of fresh fish going to waste. She saw an opportunity in the area of fish processing, what she refers to as a "parallel activity" which includes the cleaning, cooking, packaging, marketing and sale of fish. Slowly, the group of women started suggesting recipes and products based on fish that was often overlooked or considered of low quality. Rady realized that, with the correct preparation techniques and ingredients, these fish species, could also prove to be profitable: " In Italy, horse mackerel is considered a low quality fish, but if you know how to work it, it can turn into a delicacy".

Bio e Mare's products are sold in local organic shops, restaurants and markets. In addition, [G.A.S.](#), an Italian solidarity based purchasing group put the cooperative in touch with a wider network giving them the opportunity to make new contacts. When initially attempting to access the market, Rady advises start-ups to use technology to their advantage: "we started by searching for possibilities on the Internet".

## **PRACTISING SUSTAINABLE FISHING**

For Rady and the Bio e Mare cooperative, one of the main priorities is the promotion and implementation of sustainable fishing: " Sustainable fishing is vital, we need to think about future generations and safeguard this precious resource and its incredible nutritional characteristics", she says. The fishers Rady works with practise sustainable fishing everyday by:

- Using nets with larger holes to allow younger fish that have yet to reproduce to escape
- Respecting the natural biological rhythm of fish to avoid catching fish that are reproducing. This is achieved by using specific equipment for catching different species.
- Any rubbish collected from the sea is brought back to shore and recycled or disposed of through appropriate rubbish disposal companies.

## **THE ROLE OF WOMEN**

"Part of the women's job is to remind the fishermen about the importance of sustainable fishing". She adds that women are the driving force behind the fishing industry, "we are detail-oriented, responsible and tenacious, we like to see a job through to the end". In the Bio e Mare cooperative the women are primarily involved in the processing sector, but Rady proudly explains that the women in her group own a boat and go out fishing as much as possible.

## **WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR BIO E MARE?**

Access to credit is one of the major issues the cooperative faces, "It would be helpful to have subsidies to facilitate start-ups, small cooperatives and family businesses" says Rady. Her dream is to open a restaurant with Bio e Mare products for sale at reasonable prices; "I would like to involve more people from different backgrounds and stimulate competition which, in turn, stimulates better quality". Rady's desire to keep creating and inventing new products and recipes is linked to her passion for travel.

## **SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT**

"Working in the Bio e Mare cooperative is hard work, but the sense of accomplishment and positive feedback from our customers as well as our contribution to waste prevention, make it worthwhile in the end". When asked about a typical working day, Rady answers: "A typical working day starts the day before!" She stresses that the cooperative is firmly against the exploitation of workers, staff never work over 8 hours a day, before passionately adding, "that doesn't stop me working 20 hours a day doing what I love!"

## **EXCHANGING IDEAS AND THE FAMILY FARMING EXPO**

When asked about what other fishers and cooperatives can learn from Bio e Mare, Rady answers: "It's not about what they can learn from us, I would prefer to call it an exchange of ideas and experiences, the learning process always works two ways". She explains that in 2011, in collaboration with the Maestrale Cooperative, Bio e Mare was involved in an information exchange programme with Turkish fishers. The training was primarily on food safety, preserving the cold chain (temperature-controlled supply chain) which helps extend and ensure the shelf life of seafood and hygiene regulations. Rady adds: "We also explained the importance of sustainability, the sea in Turkey is still very rich in fish so it is important for fishers to do everything in their power to safeguard it for future generations." In return, the Turkish fishers shared interesting recipes with Bio e Mare as well as innovative ways of cleaning fish.

Rady concludes by pointing out that the Family Farming Expo experience in FAO has been extremely positive: "It has given Beppe and I the opportunity to meet other Italian producers who we may collaborate with in the future. We also met many delegates from the fisheries sector this week who have shown a lot of interest in our products, this has been very encouraging". "We hope that they may take some of these ideas back to their respective countries," she adds, before concluding: " We don't hide our ideas, we like to inspire others as well as learn from them! "

[More information on Bio e Mare](#)

[The role of fish in feeding the world](#)